

Translating Books for Children

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Books for children are very special. Children are the largest literate and open-hearted audience in the world, waiting to be reached, and the publishers have a vast market to satisfy. Even though new creative writing is coming out in larger quantities than ever before, this is still limited. Besides, there are many languages still lacking enough quality literature. In India alone there are more than sixteen languages and over three hundred dialects. The development and availability of quality literature in all languages is of a varying order.

The only way all children can benefit from the pooled resource of available books is through translation. Translations open windows onto the world and make contributions to children's minds in ways not possible otherwise. S.K. Pottekat while receiving the Jnanpith Award said, "The purpose of literature is to awaken man—it is also to bring together the different people of our vast country through a sense of equality, love, cooperation and mutual understanding—bring them together no matter whether Bengali, Punjabi or Tamilian."

Good literature for children is for all children. However developed a particular country or a language group may be, it cannot afford to miss quality literature from other language groups and other countries. In fact the growth of good literature itself depends on the interaction with the ideas and literature from different places and cultures. A case in point is the *Panchatantra*. The *Panchatantra* stories remained as oral literature for

thousands of years and long before they came to be written, these stories had already gone out of India with the travellers and tourists to the West Asian and even to European countries. Aesop adapted many of these stories for his collection of fables. Later, these stories were translated into Pahlavi, old Syrian, Arabic, Greek and into several European languages. By now the stories have been translated and adapted among all peoples of the world through more than twenty languages.

As a philosopher writes, "When children of one country come to know and love the books and stories of many countries they have made an important beginning toward international and national understanding. To know the classic stories of a country creates a climate, an attitude for understanding the people for whom that literature is a heritage. When children know they are reading in translation the same stories which children in another country are reading, a sense of nearness grows and expands. Interchange of children's books between countries, through translation influences communication between the people of those countries and if the books chosen for travelling from language to language are worthy books, the resulting communication may be deeper, richer, more sympathetic, more enduring."

Even for the publishers, translation provides an attractive proposition. Books which have been tested already in the market find relatively easy acceptance. The promotion effort required is also minimal. Besides, quality manuscripts need not only good writers but also competent editors who are not available in abundance and the publisher gets a ready-made and market-tested material which can easily fill his publishing list.

However, good translations need special

care and special skill. Translation is in some ways a re-creation of a piece of literature, requiring a certain measure of empathy and understanding on the part of the translator, and a good knowledge of the two languages. The beauty of the language and the nuances of its usage have not only to be understood but re-created in the translation.

In our country, we face the twin problems of having to provide for translations from one Indian language to another—itsself a major challenge because of so many languages—and from foreign languages into Indian languages. Presently available translations leave out a number of languages within the country itself. Among the foreign languages English is the major source of children's books. An action plan is therefore necessary to provide translation of good books (from different languages) into all the major languages of our country.

Title selection

What to translate is the most difficult problem a publisher faces. For him, publishing is a business and he would like to select titles which would sell. For this reason most of the available translations in Indian languages are from the Indian and English classics. Some publishers bring out their own titles in different Indian languages. There is little effort however, to locate good literature in different languages for bringing out translations even in the national language Hindi.

To begin with, publishers may endeavour to bring out translations of their own best sellers. Considering that we have sixteen major languages, it is not possible for most publishers to arrange quality translation in all languages and to organise marketing all over the country. This can be achieved only if sufficient interest is taken by the book development agencies

of the respective states, because it should be in their interest also to promote such translations.

This is not to say the publishers cannot do anything by themselves. The least that they may do would be to translate their own successful titles into the national language and one or two languages in use in neighbouring states; for example, a publisher in Calcutta could possibly provide translations in Oriya, Assamese and Hindi; a publisher in Madras could provide translations in Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Hindi and a Bombay publisher in Hindi and Gujarati.

The selection of titles is best done by a team comprised of persons who can evaluate the relevance of a book to the potential readers and also persons having command over both the languages. To evaluate the translation and its success in transmitting the original, the evaluator or the consultant must know, in addition to the language, the art of translation.

The fact that mostly classical and folktales of different regions have been widely translated shows that the publishers have made the title selection rather too cautiously. What is required is an extra initiative in locating modern titles from the current literature. The largest segment of the translation would perhaps be drawn from successful fiction, but care must be taken to pick up titles with rich and interesting contents. In the field of non-fiction also there is ample scope to select good titles, biographies, travelogues, popular science, etc.

Humour is so lacking in Indian children's books. Good humorous books can easily be taken for translation and would find ready acceptance because children love to read humour. There is plenty of healthy humour for children in the Urdu language and can be taken up for translation in other languages. Hindi translation

of some of these titles has already proved successful.

A word of caution, however, is necessary. While it is important to pick up the gems of fiction and non-fiction in different languages, it is equally necessary to avoid any misplaced enthusiasm for picking up a 'gem' where only a stone exists. Some publishing houses have made this error and have published translations from different languages groups merely to satisfy populist pressures and are now unable to market their books. Besides, for example, if some original titles on Lord Buddha already exist in a particular language, it would be a wasteful effort to publish a translation unless the intrinsic quality of the book is of a high order. Louis Fisher's and Romain Rolland's books on Gandhi have been widely read in translation, despite the existence of numerous other books originally written in different languages.

Selection of a translator

In our country selection of a translator is a difficult job where people are often unnecessarily sensitive about their own language. There are not many people who write in more than one language. At the same time, the need for translation is ever increasing and so is the popularity of learning more than one language. The availability of good translated books even in Hindi is not very wide.

To get best results it is important that the person who translates the selected title into Hindi should have Hindi as the mother tongue and also know the language in which the book is originally written and have a feel for children's books. The person whose mother tongue is the language he is going to translate into, is better aware of the usage of the language and can do justice to the translation. In today's scene in the country, the unfortunate

part of the story is that the translators in regional languages are often not proficient in Hindi and Hindi writers do not learn other regional languages in large numbers. The translated books for children are therefore generally far from satisfactory.

Command of two languages

Translation does not mean a literal translation. In proper perspective, translation is the transcreation of the original. This applies particularly to fiction, where the flow of the language and its usage brings life to the content and makes the book gripping. The translated book stands on its own merit and translations, particularly of fiction, often become more popular than the original. The works of many French and Russian novelists have become English classics because of the good translation. Most of these good English translations are done by people whose mother tongue is English and who know the other language equally well. Translating children's books requires an additional qualification. The translator must know well the requirements of a children's book, without which it is not easy to recreate the book in another language.

Revising of translations

Revising of a translation is as important a requirement as the translation itself. A translator alone is not enough to do a satisfactory job. In this process the translated version is doubly checked and the best results can be achieved if the reviser himself is a writer of children's books.

In good translation the merit of the original language is so completely transfused into another language as to be distinctly appreciated, and as strongly felt by a native of the region or the country to which that language belongs as it is by others who speak the language of the original work. The quality of a translation is judged by comparison with the original.